

Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian *Lactans*-Iconography*

Abstract

This article provides an overview of the scholarship on the relationship between depictions of Isis and Mary that show them breastfeeding or offering their breast (representations of the *lactans*-type) in Egypt. In particular, it questions the notion of a deliberate cultic continuity between the two holy women based on the similarity of their iconography. The evidence demonstrates that whereas Isis *lactans* can be documented in the Mediterranean from 700 BCE until the fourth century CE, *Maria lactans*-imagery only appears uncontested in Egypt from the seventh century CE onwards. This evidence, therefore, does not warrant a generalization that there was a deliberate continuity between the cult of Isis and that of Mary. Although the similarities between the Isis and *Maria lactans*-imagery are undeniable, they need to be understood within their respective cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTION

When looking at images of the Egyptian goddess Isis and those of the Virgin Mary, one may initially observe iconographic similarities. These parallels have led many scholars to suggest that there is a distinct iconographic relationship between Isis and Mary. In fact, some scholars have gone even further, and have suggested, on the basis of this relationship, a direct link between the cult of Mary and that of Isis.¹ These factors have led various scholars to believe that Christians deliberately adopted “pagan” cults to mark Christian triumph. This idea fits well into the persistent view of Late Antiquity as a time of conflict between “paganism” and Christianity, from which the new religion quickly emerged triumphant. In his *The World of Late Antiquity*, Peter Brown was the first to seriously question the monolithic notions of “conflict” and Christian “triumph.”² His book presents religious transformation as a complex and gradual process of cultural change, a period of interaction between the traditional cults and practices and Christianity, rather than one of conflict. As a result, scholars have moved

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1 See below for a discussion of the scholarship concerning the relationship between Isis and Mary.

2 BROWN, 1971.

away from the notions of “conflict” and “triumph” towards a more nuanced understanding of religious transformation.³ It seems that the idea of a triumphalist adoption of “pagan” cults is also in need of revision.

A good example to illustrate this point is the case of Menouthis (near Alexandria), where a church of Saints Cyrus and John was placed in the proximity of the temple of Isis Medica. Cyrus and John were martyrs whose cult at Menouthis was associated with oracles and miraculous dreams. While we cannot discount the possibility of continuity in the type of cult (both were oracular cults), there is no evidence to suggest that the cult of Isis was deliberately adopted. Some scholars have proposed that the similarity of the name Cyrus (Κύρος in Greek) might have been reminiscent of the epithet “lady” (κυρία) of Isis, and assumed from this similarity that a “cult adoption” took place.⁴ However, the similarity of these names seems to be pure chance and cannot be used as evidence for a deliberate adoption of a “pagan” cult. Other scholars have asserted that a “religious transference” took place, and suggest the similarity of the epithets or the perpetuation of the oracular cult as the basis for this transmission.⁵ But one need only to look at the distinct topography of the sites to observe that there is a disconnection in place of worship.⁶ What happened here, therefore, was merely a borrowing of function, a place in which the Christian cult adapted one aspect of an existing model of the cult of Isis. By extension, then, we need to be careful in assuming too readily a continuity of cultic worship from Isis to Mary.⁷

In this article, I will first introduce the work of Tran Tam Tinh, whose thorough study on the iconography of Isis *lactans* in the 1970s has demonstrated that any connection between Isis and Mary is tenuous and can be discerned solely in the *lactans*-iconography. His departure from the previous line of scholarship was innovative, but despite his arguments, several later scholars continued to uphold the notion that a deliberate adoption took place from the cult of Isis to that of Mary. In the next section, I will briefly discuss the studies of these scholars working on the relationship between the iconography of the holy women, and demonstrate that each author’s individual approach is determined by his/her field of study. I will conclude with a reevaluation of the current scholarship in order to provide a more balanced understanding of the interpretation of the association between Isis and Mary.

THE EVIDENCE COLLECTED BY TRAN TAM TINH

In his study, Tran Tam Tinh offers a nuanced and detailed analysis of the development of *lactans*-iconography. He traces the iconography of the *lactans*-type from its earliest appearances in Egypt to its extensive use in Isiac imagery and concludes with an overview of its influence on Marian iconography. The *lactans*, or the gesture of offering the breast for feeding or the act of nursing, has a distinct symbolism in ancient Egypt. It symbolizes that the milk emitted from the divine is representative of the nourishment of life and divinity.⁸ From 700 BCE we can see a rise in popularity of Isiac votive statues of the *lactans*-type, almost all of which share the same characteristics: the goddess is sitting on a throne with no backrest or a very low one; sometimes

3 For an up-to-date overview of the scholarship on religious transformation in Late Antique Egypt, see DIJKSTRA, 2008: 14–18.

4 E.g. MERKELBACH, 1995: 327–328; RICHTER, 2002: 134–135.

5 ATHANASSIADI, 1993: 15.

6 MONTSERRAT, 1998.

7 DIJKSTRA, 2005: 168.

8 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 1.

she has a throne on her head or she wears a horned sun-disk; her legs are parallel and feet are flat on the floor; her proper right hand is placed on her left breast and her left hand holds up Horus' head; the legs of her son hang over the left hand side of her lap; and he holds his hands towards his body, while avoiding the gaze of his mother (figs. 1 and 2).⁹

Tran Tam Tinh's study recognizes the similarities in the iconography of Isis and *Maria lactans* without suggesting that a deliberate adoption took place between the cults of Isis and Mary. He further notes the integral role of the feminine divinity in the religions of Egypt and the Mediterranean, especially the tradition of mother goddesses and the iconography associated with them.¹⁰ The strength of his approach is that it provides a sequential development of the Isis *lactans*-type and concludes with a discussion of its similarities to the iconography of *Maria lactans*. The earliest images of Mary concentrate especially on Christological and eschatological themes, including Jesus sitting on Mary's knees or presenting Jesus to the Magi. Mary is secondary in these roles, and her presence in these images reflects her role in the biblical narratives of the birth of Jesus.¹¹ Tran Tam Tinh asserts that many scholars conflate the image of Jesus sitting on Mary's lap with the *Maria lactans*-type. The *lactans*-imagery is characterized by the invitation of the child to the mother's breast for feeding or nursing, and should not be confused with the quite different iconography of a seated mother and child.

There are two images in the catacombs of Priscilla in Rome, both dating to the third century, that have been claimed as the earliest representations of *Maria lactans*. The first depicts a group scene with a woman in a praying gesture (*orans*), to the left a virgin, and to the right a woman in a toga with a naked child (fig. 3).¹² The child clings to the chest of the woman but there is nothing that would indicate a breastfeeding scene. Furthermore, the painting lacks any attributes which could positively identify this woman as Mary. The second scene depicts the Good Shepherd in the center, to the right the prophet Balaam with a seated Virgin and child (fig. 4).¹³ The child seems to be caressing the breast of his mother, but again there is no evidence to suggest breastfeeding. The figures in the catacombs are not of the *lactans*-type, and thus Tran Tam Tinh notes that they are not representative of the earliest *Maria lactans*-iconography. In fact, he demonstrates that the image of *Maria lactans* does not appear uncontested in the archaeological record until the seventh century, and only in Egypt.¹⁴

The lack of evidence for Isis *lactans* after the fourth century CE and the absence of any representations of *Maria lactans* which are definitively dated prior to the seventh century end any discussion of a direct chronological sequence between Isis and *Maria lactans* in Egypt. Furthermore, while there are several depictions of Isis *lactans* in the third century, Tran Tam Tinh records only three such representations in the fourth century,

9 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 8–9, figs. 7 and 8. There is a statuette that has been interpreted as Isis *lactans* dating to 1,900 BCE. However, it has not been included in the present discussion, because its attribution is still questioned on account of its lack of definitive attributes. Nevertheless, its presence demonstrates that the *lactans*-imagery was prevalent in Egypt for millennia prior to the arrival of Mary in Egypt.

10 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 42.

11 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 43. See also WELLEN, 1960: 14–90 who demonstrates that many of the early depictions of Mary feature Jesus sitting on her lap.

12 GRABAR, 1966: 116, fig. 115; TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 46; PARLBY, 2008: 48.

13 GRABAR, 1966: 99, fig. 95; PARLBY, 2008: 48–49.

14 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 42.

including a limestone statue from Antinoe (fig. 5),¹⁵ a wall painting from Karanis (fig. 6) and a limestone statuette from Akhmim (fig. 7).¹⁶ Thus, he demonstrates a decline in usage of this imagery in the fourth century CE and a significant sequential gap as compared with its later uses in Christian iconography. Tran Tam Tinh does, however, discuss one funeral stela that may provide the earliest chronological link between Isis and *Maria lactans*. He dates this stela, which has been found at Medinet el-Fayum, to the fifth or sixth century (fig. 8).¹⁷ The image was done in a “graffito” style, lightly incised, and portrays a seated woman offering her breast to her child. The woman may well be Christian as there is a cross on either side of her head; however, there is no indication that mother and child should represent Mary and Jesus.¹⁸ In a study that appeared four years after Tran Tam Tinh’s, Effenberger has demonstrated that this stela should be dated to the fourth century CE.¹⁹ In fact, two painted inscriptions (one on either side of the woman), which were discovered during an examination of the original in Berlin, have revealed that this stela is meant to represent a deceased woman. The inscription reads:

| | | |
|----|---------------------|----------------------|
| | Left side of image: | Right side of image: |
| | ΕΥΜΥ- | Εὐψύ- |
| | ἡμᾶ (?) | ΧΙ |
| | ἔτη[ν] | ἄγα- |
| | κα οὐ- | θέ. |
| 5. | δῖς | |
| | ἀθάνα- | |
| | τος. | |

The left column reads, “(Name?) 21 years old. No one is immortal,” the one to the right “Be of good cheer, you great one.”²⁰ Thus, Effenberger concludes that the stela from Medinet el-Fayum is not a representation of *Maria lactans*, but that it rather demonstrates a “spilling over” of the contemporary iconography of Isis *lactans*

15 Cf. VON FALCK, 1996: 76, cat. no. 7, in which it is suggested that the statuette from Antinoe may be a partial falsification as changes were made to the head of Isis, her left forearm, the surface of her garment, as well as the hand and head of the child. Furthermore, there is no conclusive evidence to attribute this statue to Antinoe, and a revised date of the third century has been suggested. This date further limits the number of Isis *lactans* representations in fourth-century Egypt.

16 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 54–55, 60–61, 72, figs. 17, 30 and 48. Tran Tam Tinh defines the term *lactans* as the offering of the breast for the purpose of feeding or nursing. A distinction needs to be made, however, between the *lactans* and the simple gesture of showing the breast. For instance, in the fresco from Karanis and the statuette from Akhmim, there is no evidence of Horus reaching for the breast or engaging Isis in the act of nursing. The similarity of these representations to the *lactans*-type is undeniable and warrants an inclusion in a discussion of *lactans*-imagery, but a more complex understanding of the distinction between the two postures is needed (cf. MATTHEWS and MULLER, 2005: 5–6), which will be worked out further in the author’s PhD-thesis.

17 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 45, fig. 202. See also WESSEL, 1964: 17, fig. 5.

18 Cf. TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 29–30, 45.

19 EFFENBERGER, 1977.

20 EFFENBERGER, 1977: 163–167.

into individual funerary art.²¹ This interpretation has recently been taken up by Parlasca who discusses another funerary stela from Egypt, currently in Warsaw, with *lactans*-iconography, dating to the second century CE.²² This particular stela has an inscription that names the woman as a twenty-one-year-old mother named Sarapous and her son Hierax. In this case, we have a definitive representation of a mother and child, not of a saint or a goddess, and there is no indication that this image should be designated as Christian. According to Effenberger, however, the addition of the crosses to the stela from Medinet el-Fayum indicates that we have here the first Christian appropriation of the Isis *lactans* imagery and that the stela can be seen as a prototype for the later representations of *Maria lactans*.²³

Two wall paintings, discovered in the excavations of the monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara, are identified as the oldest surviving certain representations of *Maria lactans*, and have been dated to the seventh century CE.²⁴ The first of these is located in a monk's cell (cell A), framed in a niche, and depicts Jesus sitting on Mary's lap, holding her arm with both hands while she offers him her breast (fig. 9).²⁵ This representation of Mary is noticeably hieratic as her gaze is forward and static. The second image is located in cell 1725 and is iconographically close to the aforementioned image (fig. 10).²⁶ In this case, however, Mary is visually more maternal in her gesture, although both consist of a definitive maternal act. The same monastery yielded a third representation of the *Maria lactans* in cell 1807, but the painting is no longer extant.²⁷

Two images of *Maria lactans* have also been recorded at the monastery of Apa Apollo at Bawit. Like the paintings at Saqqara, these images were also located in monastic cells. The first image was placed in a niche in cell XLII of the monastery, although it is no longer extant.²⁸ This painting has also been dated to the seventh century and conformed to the standard iconography of an enthroned Mary offering Jesus her breast. The representation of *Maria lactans* in this cell is unique to our discussion as it was part of a double composition. The upper register featured Christ enthroned, while the lower register was occupied by an image of *Maria lactans* surrounded by the twelve apostles.²⁹ Another *Maria lactans* was discovered in cell XXX at Bawit but is also no

21 For further discussion on this stela, see CORRINGTON, 1989: 403–404; VON FALCK, 1996: 114–115, cat. no. 61; LANGENER, 1996: 152–164; THOMAS, 2000: 71; TÖRÖK, 2005: 271–272; PARLASCA, 2007: 323–324.

22 PARLASCA, 2007: 324, with references.

23 EFFENBERGER, 1977: 168; LANGENER, 1996: 156–157. Further study is required into the nature of the two crosses incised above the head of the deceased. They do not conform to the incision depth or style of the rest of the stela, and in fact, they appear to have been squeezed into the stela as they cut into part of the image of the woman. The question of whether the crosses belong to the original stela or not, however, is beyond the scope of this paper, and will be examined in the author's forthcoming PhD-thesis.

24 BOLMAN, 2004: 1174.

25 QUIBELL, 1908: 64, 81–82, pls. XL–XLIII; TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 44, fig. 203.

26 QUIBELL, 1912: 23, pls. XX–XXIII; TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 44, fig. 204.

27 For the excavation records see QUIBELL, 1912: 19. To my knowledge no photograph of this image has been published.

28 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 44.

29 TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 44. Here he cites CLÉDAT, 1904: 522, fig. 1; 1999: 39–55 for the original interpretation and analysis of the *Maria lactans*. Cf. VAN LOON, 2007: 32 who states that a number of these double compositions have been found in the eastern niches of cells and chapels at Bawit and Saqqara. The upper zone usually contains

longer extant. Both, however, conformed to the same iconography as at Saqqara; Jesus grabs Mary's left arm with both hands, while she presents her breast with her left hand.³⁰

These five images represent all of the certain, known images of the *Maria lactans*-type in Egypt when Tran Tam Tinh published his study in 1973. A sixth image of *Maria lactans* from the north conch of the church of Anba Bishay (church of the Red Monastery, near Sohag) can be added to this list (fig. 11).³¹ This figure is dated to the seventh-eighth century and shows Mary offering her left breast to Jesus with her right hand. A seventh image of *Maria lactans* was discovered in 1996 during the removal of a layer of eighteenth-century wall plaster at the church of the Virgin Mary at the Monastery of the Syrians (Deir al-Surian) in the Wadi Natrun.³² This image depicts Mary offering her right breast to Jesus with her left arm, while Jesus sits on her right lap (fig. 12). The wall painting was found on a column, on the eastern wall of the *khurus*, directly in front of the sanctuary. This image has been dated to the second half of the seventh century based on the monogram for *Hagia Maria* that was written on either side of her head, as well as the iconographic similarities of this painting to the image in cell XXX at Bawit. The addition of these two images to the iconographic type of *Maria lactans* raises the total number of representations, with definitive dates, to seven (two paintings in churches and five paintings in monastic cells).³³ Thus, the inclusion of these images further illustrates that Tran Tam Tinh's observation that the iconographic similarities between Isis and Mary are limited to the *lactans*-type and to monastic contexts still stands.

A MATTER OF APPROACH: EGYPTOLOGISTS VS. MARIOLOGISTS

Until the observations of Tran Tam Tinh were published in the 1970s and in many instances in the decades following his publication, scholars working within the parameters of the Isis-Mary debate have often drawn parallels between the two divine women. The two streams of scholarship, which I will call here the Egyptologists and the Mariologists, fall generally on opposite ends of the spectrum; whereas the Egyptologists emphasize a continuity of cult between the two women, the Mariologists argue for a disassociation of the two figures.

The first group are the Egyptologists, who highlight the similarities between Isis and *Maria lactans* and indicate that the former had a strong influence on the creation of the latter. While the similarity of the Isis and *Maria lactans*-iconography is undeniable, these scholars have projected further connections or transpositions

a representation of Christ in Majesty and the lower zone is occupied by the Virgin Mary, either as an orant or enthroned with Child.

30 WALTERS, 1974: 286.

31 BOLMAN, 2006: pls. 1 and 5; 2008: 305–317; LAFERRIÈRE, 2008: 26–28, pl. 4; DIJKSTRA and VAN LOON, 2010: 8, 12.

32 INNEMÉE, 1998; INNEMÉE, et al., 1998: 86–87; BOLMAN, 2005: 21, fig. 2.2; 2008: 1182–1184, fig. 2.

33 BOLMAN, 2008: 1174 (n. 5) provides a list of all the known representations of *Maria lactans*, but surprisingly omits the *Maria lactans* from both the Red Monastery and Deir al-Surian, although she briefly mentions the *lactans* from Deir al-Surian on p. 1182. Bolman also mentions a papyrus fragment which has been dated by its first editor to the fifth-sixth century (BARTOLETTI, 1965: 29–31, pl. 10a, followed most recently by BARTOLETTI et al., 2008: 402, no. 1574). The date and interpretation of this papyrus will be addressed in the author's PhD-thesis. Bolman also includes four manuscript front pieces dating to the ninth and tenth centuries; these manuscripts, however, exceed the established time parameters (fourth to eighth century) of the present article.

of Isiac worship onto Mary. For example, a German dissertation of the 1950s by Unger suggests that the use of the epithet Theotokos, or “God-Bearer,” was a transferral of the attributes of Isis onto Mary. The common title for Isis in ancient Egyptian, *mwt ntr*, can be translated as “divine mother.” This has led to the assertion that the title Theotokos, with regards to Mary, would have been used for the first time in Egypt and that the development of the cult of Mary would have begun in Egypt as well. Thus, he concludes that the adaptation of Isiac iconography was a natural progression from the previous attributes of Isis.³⁴ In the same way, Witt sees the continuity of Isiac worship ingrained in the theology and even the iconography of Mary.³⁵

A more nuanced approach of the potential iconographic relationship between the two women may be observed in the work of the well-known Egyptologist Françoise Dunand. She recognizes that the imagery of a goddess holding a child in her arms is not unique to Isis and Mary, as it appears frequently throughout history in Greece, Anatolia, and even in the Neolithic period.³⁶ Furthermore, the *lactans*-type has a precedent in ancient Egyptian religion outside of Isiac imagery, such as in depictions of the goddess Mut at Gebel-Silsila.³⁷ Dunand further states that if scholars are to reconcile a relationship between Isis and Mary, Isis must have demonstrated an iconographical influence over the Virgin in both time and space.³⁸ Although Dunand provides a more nuanced understanding of the nature of mother goddess iconography throughout the Mediterranean, she still advocates for a direct connection between the iconography of Isis and Mary. She states that Isis’ prevalence in the psyche of Egyptians in Late Antiquity suggests that Christians would have adopted and reused her iconography in their new religion, which could in fact suggest a cultic continuation or syncretism of the two holy women.³⁹

The second group of scholars are the Mariologists. For this group of scholars, the idea of a deliberate adoption from the cult of Isis to that of Mary has a negative connotation, since they work from the notion that most Christian cults were disassociated with the past.⁴⁰ By approaching the study of Isis and Mary from this point of view, Marian scholars have emphasised that the venerated women do not function in the same manner. As a result, the scholarship confronting the issue from a Mariological approach is careful not to suggest a syncretism of the two cults. Averil Cameron, for example, states that religious development cannot be explained in mono-causal terms and argues that syncretism would only have played a minor role. Moreover, she suggests competition as a more effective model to understand their similarities.⁴¹

Maza, on the other hand, is more assertive in her disassociation of the two cults. Her study concludes that the figure of the Virgin Mary appears as a result of a gradual amplification that converted her from a minor character in the Christian tradition to a divine presence by a process of theological re-creation for purposes of her newly established dogma at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE.⁴² Maza further notes that Mary did not

³⁴ UNGER, 1957: 116–117.

³⁵ WITT, 1997: 278.

³⁶ DUNAND, 2000: 161.

³⁷ As mentioned by TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: 3.

³⁸ DUNAND, 2000: 161.

³⁹ DUNAND, 2000: 165.

⁴⁰ MAZA, 2000: 213.

⁴¹ CAMERON, 2004: 13.

⁴² MAZA, 2000: 213.

initially have any divine attributes, unlike Isis, who was wholly divine and autonomous from the beginning. Thus, she asserts that it is inappropriate to suggest religious continuity from seeming parallels in iconography. This line of thought is taken up by McGuckin who argues that many of the representations of Mary, such as that of the *Maria lactans*, were understood by Christians from the outset within their own cultural syntax, and used by them to recruit followers of traditional religions.⁴³ He recognizes that many of the similarities are incidental and might be insignificant, whereas other iconographic features were deliberately selected because the image of Mary would find resonance with followers of Isis. He does not suggest, however, that a syncretism took place from the Christian perspective.

Other scholars, notably Corrington and Bolman, have provided additional clarity to the Mariological debate by marrying the disciplines of art history and theology, and focusing specifically on the meaning of the *Maria lactans* imagery within a Christological framework. They have examined the physical act of nursing and have grounded its implications in Christology. The image of *Maria lactans* highlights the divine nature of Jesus because Mary was a virgin and was, as a result, incapable of producing milk. The divine nature of Christ is thus emphasized, as he suckles the divine food provided to him by God. The milk, or the act of nursing, acts primarily as a metaphor for the Eucharist, and maintains an entirely Christian meaning, independent of any iconographic similarities it may bear with Isis *lactans*.⁴⁴

DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A MORE COMPLEX VIEW

While both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, I opt for a middle approach in the interpretation of the relationship between Isis and Mary. On the one hand, there are clear iconographic links between the Isis and *Maria lactans*-type, but on the other, there is little substantiation to suggest that this particular Isiac imagery had a deep impact on the artistic repertoire of the Virgin Mary. While the iconographic parallel between both *lactans*-types is undeniable, its limited use and containment to a monastic context suggest that it was not widely adopted by those wishing to illustrate the Virgin. Thus, we have a clear borrowing of the image, but this does not warrant making generalizations for a deliberate cultic continuity. While we have to take into account that the limited preservation of many sites, pillaging and modern construction has forever damaged many potential clues to the prevalence of this imagery, the sources as they stand limit both the number and provenience of extant *Maria lactans* images and suggest that even if there is some continuity in the imagery, this does not warrant the conclusion that a deliberate adoption took place between the cults of Isis and Mary.

A reevaluation of the evidence thus suggests that a distinct iconographic link between the Isis and *Maria lactans*-type exists, but that this is not indicative of the adoption of the cult of Isis by the cult of Mary. Even though this specific Marian image may well have been borrowed from the Isiac iconographic repertoire, it would have been understood within a distinctively Christological framework. Both Mary and Isis were worshipped differently, Isis as a goddess in her own right, while Mary was important insofar as her relationship to her son was concerned. The monks were borrowing this image from the familiar iconographic repertoire of Isis and other Egyptian mother goddesses. The same notion of iconographic borrowing can also be seen with the *ankh*-cross.⁴⁵ Still the symbolism of the imagery would have been understood from a Christian perspective. In

⁴³ MCGUCKIN, 2008: 11.

⁴⁴ CORRINGTON, 1989: 412–413; BOLMAN, 2004: 1181–1182.

⁴⁵ See DIJKSTRA, 2012: 81, with references.

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sum, when taking away a triumphalist interpretation of the ties between Isis and Mary, a more intricate process of transformation arises, which deserves to be studied in its full capacity.

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Figure 1. Isis *lactans* (eighth century BCE); Louvre, Paris (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 7). Isis holds her right hand to her breast.



Figure 2. Isis *lactans* (seventh-sixth century BCE); National Archaeological Museum of Naples, Naples (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 8). Isis holds her right hand to her breast, while Horus sits on her lap.

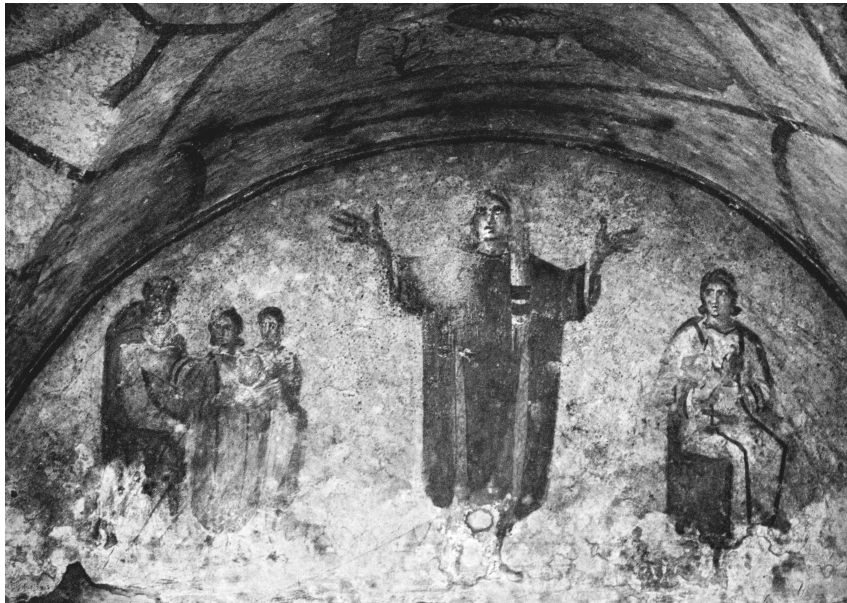


Figure 3. Woman and child (third century CE); Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome (GRABAR, 1966: fig. 115).
Woman holding a child on the right side of her body.



Figure 4. Woman and child (third century CE); Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome (GRABAR, 1966: fig. 95).
Woman holding child on her right knee.



Figure 5. Limestone statuette of Isis *lactans* from Antinoe (fourth century CE); Dahlem Museum, Berlin (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 17). Isis holds her breast with her right hand, while Horus lies across her left knee.



Figure 6. Fresco of Isis *lactans* at Karanis (fourth century CE); Karanis (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 48). Isis offers her breast with her right hand, while Horus sits frontally on her left leg, holding his finger to his lips.



Figure 7. Limestone statuette of Isis *lactans* from Akhmim (fourth century CE); Staatliche Museen, Berlin (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 30). Fragmentary statuette of Isis with Horus sitting on her left leg.



Figure 8. Funeral stela from Medinet el-Fayum (fourth century CE); Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 202). Woman offering her breast with her right hand, while she holds her child in her left arm.



Figure 9. *Maria lactans* at the monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara (seventh century CE); Coptic Museum, Cairo (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 203). Mary offers her right breast with her left hand, while Jesus sits on her right knee.



Figure 10. *Maria lactans* in cell 1725 at the monastery of Apa Jeremiah at Saqqara (seventh century CE); Coptic Museum, Cairo (TRAN TAM TINH, 1973: fig. 204). Mary offers her right breast with her left hand, while Jesus sits on her right knee.



Figure 11. *Maria lactans* in the church of Anba Bishay, Red Monastery (seventh-eighth century CE); reconstruction (LAFERRIÈRE, 2008: pl. 4). Mary offers her left breast with her right hand, while Jesus sits on her left knee.

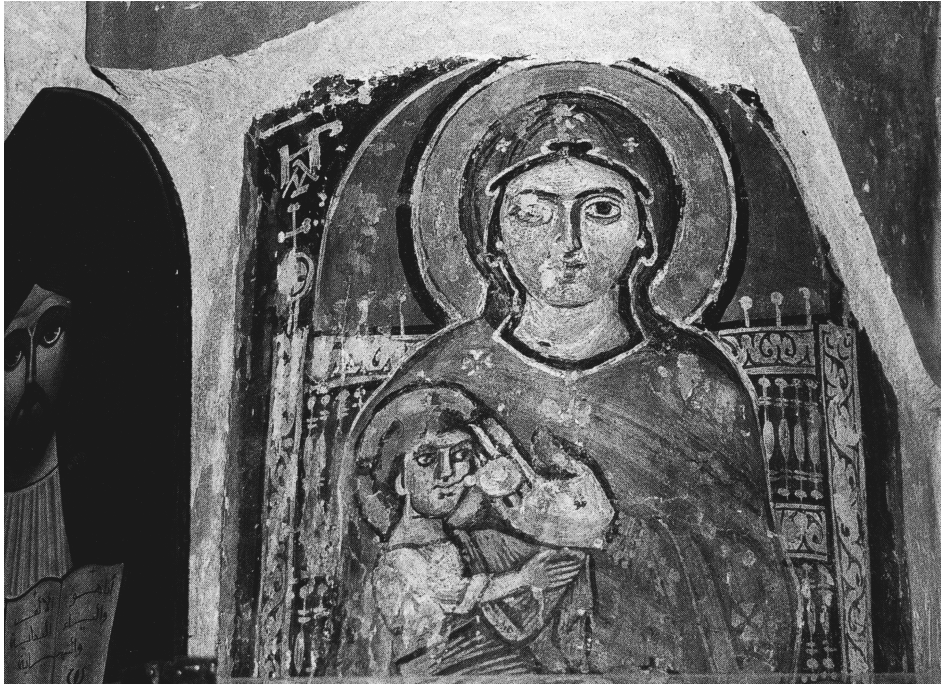


Figure 12. *Maria lactans* (second half of seventh century CE); wall painting, *khurus*, church of the Virgin Mary, Deir al-Surian (BOLMAN, 2004: fig. 2). Mary offers her right breast with her left hand, while Jesus sits on her right knee.